Teaching Reduced Forms: Putting the Horse before the Cart

By Robert W. Norris

In recent years much research and discussion has been carried out concerning what processes are involved in listening comprehension and how this pertains to teaching. It is generally agreed that there are two distinct, but complementary processes: "bottom-up" and "top-down." Bottom-up processing refers to decoding the sounds of a language into words, clauses, sentences, etc. and using one's knowledge of grammatical or syntactic rules to interpret meaning. Top-down processing refers to using background knowledge or previous knowledge of the situation, context, and topic to experience to anticipate, predict, and infer meaning. Native speakers obviously have a cultural advantage in this regard.

Many of the listening materials on the market today are concerned chiefly with helping learners become more adept at improving top-down skills by having them perform tasks in identifying relevant information while ignoring unnecessary details. In order to simulate the knowledge that native speakers bring to any listening event, learners are often provided with vocabulary lists prior to the task and told who the speakers are, what the situation is, and what the topic is about. However, scant attention is paid to the phonological characteristics that mark informal speech. This seems a bit like putting the cart before the horse.

Among the many micro-skills learners need at the bottom-up processing level are discriminating among the distinctive sounds of English, recognizing the stress patterns of words, recognizing the rhythmic structure of English, recognizing the functions of stress and intonation to signal the informational structure of utterances, identifying words in stressed and unstressed positions, recognizing reduced forms of words, distinguishing word boundaries, recognizing grammatical word clauses, and recognizing typical word-order patterns (Richards 1983). Clearly, teachers are asking a lot from their students, particularly lower-level students, when top-down listening tasks are given without first assessing the students' ability to do bottom-up processing.

Given the time constraints that most classes are placed under, teachers face a difficult problem in analyzing student needs and providing appropriate activities. Even if it is agreed that students need more practice in improving bottom-up processing skills, what areas should be focused on and what kinds of activities should be used? This paper proposes raising students' consciousness of stress patterns and reduced forms, and giving plenty of practice in recognizing these forms.

Reduced Forms and the Role of Stress

Gillian Brown (l990:6) notes that "students whose education has been largely couched in slowly and deliberately spoken English are often shocked to find, when they enter a context in which native speakers are talking to each other, that they have considerable difficulty in understanding

what is being said." One of the main reasons for this difficulty is that speech that is primarily addressed to native speakers is replete with reduced forms. Reduced forms are the changes that occur in natural speech due to the environment or context in which words are found (Herschenhorn 1979). Brown and Hilferty (1986) use the term "reduced forms" to refer collectively to the processes of contraction, elision, assimilation, and reduction (e.g., *there's, coulda, wanna,* and *howarya* for "there is," "could have," "want to," and "how are you," respectively).

Directly related to reduced forms is the function of stress in English. Every language has its own characteristic rhythm. According to G. Brown (1990: 43), rhythm in English "is not something extra added to the basic sequence of consonants and vowels, it is the guide to the structure of information in the spoken language." The rhythm of English is based on the contrast of stressed and unstressed syllables.

All English words have stress patterns which are quite stable when the word is pronounced in isolation. When words are combined in utterances, however, not all words are stressed. G. Brown (1990:53) states that in cases where "contrastive stress" is not involved nearly all grammatical words will lose their stress when they are combined to form an utterance, whereas nearly all lexical words will keep their stress. Grammatical words are the words that show the relations between the parts of an utterance-prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, etc. Lexical words are the words that carry the meaning of the utterance-nouns, main verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. The function of stress is to mark the information-bearing words in an utterance.

The feature of unstressed syllables leads to reductions in spoken English. Before foreign students can ever begin to incorporate top-down processing skills in comprehending spoken English, they must first be able to decode the sounds they hear and develop the many micro-skills listed earlier. This is particularly true for foreign learners (e.g., Japanese) whose native languages normally place an equal amount of stress on each syllable.

Students should not be required to mimic native-speaker pronunciation exactly, but they do need to be guided toward recognizing stress patterns and reduced forms. They need to be aware of different ways of marking stress, and able to recognize stress rapidly and accurately enough to work out the structure of the message of an utterance.

Teachers need to be aware of what high frequency reduced forms occur in spoken English before setting out to give students practice in recognizing them. Weinstein's (1982) text *WhaddayaSay?* contains twenty common patterns and is a good place to start. Similar lists can also be found in Ur (1984), Brown and Hilferty (1989), and Brown (1990). Teachers can also draw up their own lists by writing down the most frequent reduced forms they hear when listening to radio and television programs, movies, and conversations among native speakers.

Dictation, Cloze, and Stress-marking Exercises

At the beginning of each class, the teacher can introduce from one to five new reduced forms and explain how they are reduced. The teacher first models the slow, ideal pronunciation of each reduced form, then the relaxed, fast pronunciation. For example, "What do you" and "want to" become Whaddaya and wanna. Next, by either reading or playing a tape, the teacher has the students listen to sentences containing these reduced forms. Each sentence is read or played twice, once with slow, ideal pronunciation, then again with relaxed, fast pronunciation (e.g., *"What do you want to eat?"* and *Whaddaya wanna eat?*).

Following this initial presentation, the teacher gives a dictation of the same sentences, repeating each sentence twice with relaxed, fast pronunciation. The students must write the sentences, using the full forms of the reductions they hear. For example, when they hear *Whaddaya wanna eat?* they have to write *"What do you want to eat?"* The teacher should explain that Whaddaya and wanna are merely alphabetical representations of the reduced forms and are not appropriate for any kind of writing. According to Weinstein (1982:ix), using phonetic transcriptions such as the International Phonetic Alphabet burdens "students (and teachers!) with a set of symbols that would be esoteric at best."

After the dictation, the teacher writes the correct sentences on the board (or hands out copies) so the students can compare them with what they have written. The teacher reads or plays the tape once more while the students follow along on their own copies.

A cloze exercise follows the dictation. The deleted portions should be only the reduced forms the students have studied. In this way, there is a constant review and recycling of material. Various types of cloze can be used (songs, dialogues, news broadcasts, interviews, etc.). The teacher plays the tape straight through once while the students follow along with the cloze copy, then a second time stopping after each line to allow the students time to write, and finally a third time straight through.

If the students have trouble with any particular reduced form, the teacher can replay or read that portion of the text again and ask the students to try to repeat what they hear, even if it doesn't make sense. Students should be encouraged to discuss in groups what they think they hear. If no one is able to come up with the correct answer, the teacher should repeat the problem phrase more slowly until the students recognize it. Finally, all the correct answers are given and the tape replayed once more.

Cloze exercises are easily combined with task listening exercises. They can be used either before or after the task itself. The students listen to the same text, but are asked to focus on different things. The important thing for the teacher to be aware of, however, is that tasks involve students in top-down practice, whereas cloze exercises involve students in bottom-up practice.

As the students become more accustomed to listening to and recognizing a variety of reduced forms, the teacher can gradually have the students start responding to what they hear. An effective way to do this is by incorporating the reduced forms into exchanges with the students. For example, questions such as *Whaddaya gonna do this weekend? Did ja know that cher favoriteactor is gonna get married?* and *Did JA hafta take a testyesterday?* help personalize the reduced forms by forcing the students to respond to "real life" questions. The students should be

aware that they are not responsible for using the reduced forms in their own speech, but are responsible only for trying to understand and respond to what they hear.

Games and competitions provide more variety in recognizing both reduced forms and stress patterns. One example is to divide the class into teams. The members of each team are allowed to discuss possible answers, but only the captain of each team is allowed to give the answer. The teacher reads out sentences containing one or more reduced forms. The team captains who correctly repeat the sentences in their full forms gain points for their teams. Examples of stress recognition activities include:

- Students guess the word that contains the most important information in each sentence they hear.
- Students check whether stress is placed on words showing time or place.
- Students check whether stress is placed on words that show action or time, when or what happened.
- Students check whether they hear "can" or "can't."
- Students mark on a written text where they think the stressed or unstressed words are. This can be done first without listening to the spoken text, then checking their guesses while listening.

Listening Journals

The importance of listening to as much English as possible cannot be overstated. It is unlikely that students will improve very much if the only listening practice they get is one or two hours a week in the classroom.

One way to get students to listen to English outside class is to have them keep listening journals as a homework assignment. Movies, television and radio programs, text tapes, and materials on file in school libraries are all good sources. Simple exposure to spoken language, however, is not sufficient in itself for developing listening skills. Teachers must give students appropriate guidance in selecting materials and developing strategies and goals (Rost 1990).

The type of guidance depends greatly on the level of the students and whether they are working on improving top-down or bottom-up processing skills. As most of my students are at the lower levels of comprehension, I encourage them not to worry too much about how much they can understand, but instead relax and concentrate on the stressed words and reduced forms they hear. I use the following list of guidelines for students to follow when making entries in their listening journals.

1. Write the date, time started, time finished, and type of material used.
2. Concentrate on listening for stressed words and reduced forms you have learned.

3. Write down new words and expressions you hear.
4. Make a note of reduced forms you recognize.
5. Take dictation on a one or two minute section of the tape or program you are using. Replay the tape as often as necessary.
6. If you are listening to a song, take dictation on as much of it as you can. Compare your dictation later with the lyrics.
7. Before you start listening, write down some words or expressions you expect will be used. Put a check by the ones that are used.
8. Rate the degree of difficulty for the listening passage on a scale of 1-10.
9. Rate your level of interest on a scale of 1-10.
10. Do you recommend this material for other students?
11. Listen to the tape once more. This time don't write anything. Relax. Don't try to understand everything. Listen only for stressed words. Write a brief summary of what you think you understood.

The teacher should collect the journals at regular intervals and provide feedback in the form of comments in the journals. These comments need not be overly detailed or time consuming, but should be concerned with the strategies the learners use, the programs they find interesting, how well they are managing the guidelines, and the type of notes they take while listening.

Conclusion

Foreign students of English cannot be expected to bring the same strategies to listening as native speakers do. Without an adequate grasp of how to decode a stream of sounds into segments of words, phrases, and sentences, it is impossible for students to bring into play such strategies as inferring, predicting, and using knowledge of the topic, speakers, context, etc. to understand a speaker's message.

Foreign learners should be guided from lower- to higher-level listening skills. Ur (1984) uses the terms "listening for perception" and "listening for comprehension" in categorizing activities for practicing bottom-up and top-down processing skills. The activities discussed in this paper are primarily aimed at improving "listening for perception." The eventual aim is to provide a basis for students to be able to make the transition from applying only bottom-up processing to including both bottom-up and top-down processing.

One of our responsibilities as teachers is to be aware of the existence of reduced forms and the problems they cause learners. We should give our students plenty of practice in getting accustomed to recognizing them when they occur. If we jump right into listening comprehension activities that require the students to use native speaker processing skills without first giving the students a firm grounding in decoding the stream of sounds they hear, we run the risk of putting the cart before the horse and causing the students more frustration and confusion than they can handle.

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